

MUNISH C. JOSHI

ASPECT OF SCULPTURES OF BUDDHA  
IN CHINA AND INDIA : A BRIEF SURVEY

Buddhism served as a significant force in binding together culturally the country of its birth, India and the nations that adopted it in East and South-East Asia in ancient times. With its transformation into Mahāyāna and transmission to China, Korea, Japan, etc., Buddhist art itself emerged into diverse forms in each country and was largely conditioned and shaped by local cultures and beliefs within broad conceptual and thematic framework associated thought and traditions of the faith. Yet it is possible to detect some sort of parallelism in the ancient Chinese and Indian art in Buddhist iconic presentations, especially in regard to the figure of Buddha and other associated elements.

In the present context we may like to support our case by comparing specimens of Buddhist art from India and China. An early example which shows thematic affinity with India is one of the extant free-standing columns in stone marking the entrance to the precepts of Hsiao Ching's tomb near Nankiang. Containing a fluted shaft with two bands in the upper half, it is capped with an umbrella-shaped disc serving as abacus for the surmounting lion capital of considerable volume (pl. 1). An interesting feature of the crowning umbrella is its upper surface relieved with a large lotus flower. Somewhat stylized in character, the lion capital is stated to a continuation of the Han artistic tradition; but the general format of

the column reminds us of some of the stone posts of India like those originally raised by emperor Aśoka in the third century B.C. as free standing posts with a lion capital, particularly, the one at Vaishali (Bihar) in the vicinity of a *stupa*. There are several later examples of such columns in India, especially at Sanchi associated with Buddhism. The Chinese post under reference, however, has a different purpose and in no way it is connected with Buddhism, but the presence of lotus relief on its discoid umbrella-shaped abacus tempts us to think that the author of Nanking column might have known some of the Indian monolithic memorial pillars of earlier period.

However, more definite specimen of a pillar illustrating connection with Buddhism is from Shansi area and is dated to A.D. 547. It is a square post (pl. II) with somewhat rounded top bearing carved figures of Buddha within small niches in low relief. On one of its faces, Buddha Śākyamuni has been depicted with Buddha Prabhūtaratna as per the tradition found in *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*. The pillar below the niches is relieved with an incense burner flanked by two monks and two lions thereby indicating that it was intended to be worshipped perhaps as a cosmic form of Buddha. The tradition of propitiating Buddha as a column of light was current in India as exemplified by the reliefs of Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh. The concept of illustrating Buddha as a column emanating light appears to have been introduced by Buddhist emperor Aśoka in the third century B.C., as indicated in his IV Rock Edict. It is not unlikely that the inspiration to adapt the ancient *Theravada* concept into Mahāyānic form bearing the presence of multiple Buddhas on a column may have been drawn from south Indian tradition of Buddhist iconography (pl. III).

Our postulate is also supported by an inscription dated A.D. 270 from the Buddhist site of Nagarjunakonda in South India (Andhra Pradesh) which records the presence of such Buddhist preceptors there who preached the Law of Buddha in China. We may also like to invite the attention of scholars to a more interesting object in a multi-tiered monolithic column with four faces in Cave IV at Yun Kang. Conceived in nine tiers each receding in size upwards, it has

Buddha figures within decorative niches in each of its nine stages all over. The storeyed-form of this column reminds us of a terraced-stupa, which itself seems to have been adapted in India around fifth century A.D., following the model of ancient West Asian Ziggurat. The terraced form appears to have treated as a symbolic expression of a sacred hill, and in the Buddhist context it may represent the mythical Sumeru mountain.

A distinct contribution of Mahāyānic transformation in India and elsewhere was the emergence of Buddha image in human form. The early evidence of producing Buddha's anthropomorphic figure comes from Gandhāra region (now in Pakistan) and Mathura (India) where perhaps the need to conceive and worship the Master's icon in human form was felt by certain Buddhist sects like the *Mahāsaṅghikas* and *Sarvāstivādins* as a result of their changed religious outlook. Therefore, in Chinese sculptures some reflections of the art traditions of both Mathura and Gandhāra in postures, dress and other elements are visible within conspicuous Chinese format, modelling, styles and aesthetics.

The Buddha sculptures of China have their own identity within the stylistic developments in a local or regional idiom in accordance with the medium used. Yet, in many cases, their iconic links can be detected with Mathura and Gandhāran schools of art especially in regard to poses, gestures, drapery and in some cases even in the treatment of features like head-dress (*uṣṇīṣha*), seat, etc. What particularly tempts us to recall the Mathura sculptures of Buddha of the Kushan period (pls. IV and V) with reference to certain Chinese representations of the Master are some aspects of the sculptures under reference. These comprise the presence of relatively heavier appearance, common conventional iconic traits, (sometimes modified), in respect of postures e.g., showing him standing or seated in cross-legged position in *dhyāna* (meditation) or with raised right hand with frontally exposed palm upwards in *abhaya* (offering protection) pose and left arm resting on the side or held in a *varada mudrā* (offering boon) or holding the folds of *saṅghāṭi* (drapery) and right shoulder uncovered. Buddha figures showing both the shoulders covered basically belong to Gandhāra tradition but these

are also not absent in Mathura. In fact certain finest Buddha images of fifth century from Mathura wear a charming *saighāṭi* characterized with delicately conventionalized folds covering both the shoulders. Buddha in China as in India is depicted in standing on the ground and seated (cross-legged) position generally on a lion throne. As in Mathura during Kushan period, the Buddha figures in China also up to a considerable time were commonly presented in frontal and static position. The tradition of placing Buddha on a throne (*simhāsana*) bearing the figures of lions at the base, which was invented in Mathura, was also followed in China for several centuries (pl. VI).

An important point pertaining to Mahāyāna is about the cult of *dhyānī* Buddha Amitābha which was most popular at one stage in Chinese Buddhism. The cult seems to have some connection with Mathura from where the earliest inscription dated to A.D. 104 recording the installation of Amitābha's icon comes. This image according to an epigraph was caused to enshrined by one Nāgarakshita, a member of the family of bankers and grandson of a caravan leader, with the aim of attaining the Supreme Knowledge. Mathura has also yielded some Bodhisattva heads bearing the figure of *dhyānī* Buddha Amitābha on the crest.

It also deserves to be noted that the raised right hand of Buddha figures of Mathura stood, not only for granting *abhaya* (fearlessness) but also for preaching the Law or *Dharma*. Our inference is well supported by some slabs sculpted with preaching Buddha from Lauriyān Tangai (in Pakistan) and Amaravati (in Andhra Pradesh). These figures are, however, of a later date than Mathura Buddha images associated with *Sarvāstivāda* school. It is on this account that in some Buddha sculptures we notice the palm forming the *vyākhyāna-mudrā* suggesting the act of offering explanations. This is also indicated in several sculptures including the one sculpted in Cave IV at *Yun Kang* (Shansi) about four or fifth century A.D., illustrating Buddha delivering his first Sermon (fig. 1) suggested by the presence of the figures of two antelopes on the pedestal flanking triple rings representing perhaps the sacred wheels (*dharma-chakras*).

The depiction of three wheels in Buddha's images, which also occurs in a few early Gandhāra sculptures, may probably symbolize the three *yānas* (Triple vehicles i.e. three forms of Buddhism) called: *Śrāvakayāna*, *Pratyeka-Buddha-yāna* and *Bodhisattva-yāna* as mentioned in *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* (chapter II) which stresses that all the three *yānas* are only part of the supreme *Buddha-yāna* (way of Buddha).

The two antelopes on the pedestal symbolize the Deer Park (Mṛigadāya) i.e. modern Sarnath (Varanasi) where Buddhism was founded. The idea to represent the site of first sermon with the presence of deer or antelopes occurs in the Buddhist art of Bharhut and Sanchi but it gets formalized only in Gandhāran region and thereafter transmitted to Central Asia and China on the one-hand, and to main land of India on the other. This feature, however, is totally absent in the art of Mathura.

It has also to be noted that invention of *dharma-cakra mudrā* with fingers of two palms joined together at the level of the chest in the case of Buddha images is actually of Gandhāran origin and later it was transmitted to the heart-land of India, Sarnath, where it was greatly improved by the local sculptors in the fifth century A.D. perhaps, under the *Sammitīya* school of Buddhism. In China we hardly see it in a distinct Sarnath form. However, in a limited number of cases this *mudrā* appears to be present in somewhat modified or even distorted form in a few Chinese Bodhisattva and Buddha figures either by joining two palms held together at the level of the chest or placing the right palm close to chest and exposing it downward and the left one being exposed upwards at the level of the belly. The former variety of *dharma-cakra-mudrā* can be observed in a Bodhisattva figure in cave XVII at Yun Kang (pl. VI) and the latter in respect of an image of Maitreya at Dunhuang (cave 275). In one of the early grottoes of Longmen (cave 54) one notices Buddha sculpture in similar pose illustrating *dharma-cakra-mudrā* by crossing of two palms against the chest.

A more artistic rendering of the Master as a preacher of the Law can be noted in a painted stucco figure of seated Buddha (circa sixth century A.D.) in Dunhuang Cave 248 with raised right hand (pl.

VII). In another figure of Buddha in a seated posture in Cave 328 (High Tang - 8th century A.D.) of Dunhuang raised right palm forms *abhaya-cum-Vyākhyāna-mudrā* (pose granting protection and expounding Law) with left hand resting on the folded left knee also be noticed.

The sculpture thus carries the Kushan tradition of Mathura (fig.2) in a developed form (pl. VIII) in north China. The tradition as already pointed out above gets refined in latter examples, particularly, at Dunhuang. We are not sure whether the Mathura influence on Chinese Buddha images had some kind Buddhist sectarian links with India, particularly with *Sarvāstivāda* or the features are just economic imports. In more improved examples representing *vyākhyāna-mudrā* (preaching gesture) what deserves to be noted is prominently depicted raised fore-finger of right palm. The employment of combined *abhaya* and *vyākhyāna-mudrās* in Buddha sculpture seems to have become almost an established practice to indicate exposition of Law and granting grace at an early date and by about the fifth century, this type of Buddha figure get aesthetically much refined at Mathura under Gupta period.

A most intriguing illustrations of *dharmacakra mudrā* is found in a unique painted figure of Buddha in Cave 465 at Dunhuang dated to thirteen/fourteen century AD (Yuan dynasty). The panel depicts Buddha seated in a cross-legged fashion with raised right hand in *abhaya* and holding an actual *cakra* or wheel in left hand on the lap (fig. 3). The execution of this figure appears to have had linkages with Mathura as well early Gandhāran traditions of Buddhist iconography which might have survived in this region through some illustrated manuscripts for a longer period. In the representation of seated Bodhisattva Maitreya from Dunhuang in cave 275 (fifth century AD), the *dharmacakra-mudrā* is illustrated by placing looped right palm close to the chest exposed downwards and left one exposed upwards at the level of the belly (pl. IX).

In another sculpture from China we notice an interesting parallel of one of the earliest Buddha reliefs of Mathura of the early first century AD (pl. X) depicting him seated on a pedestalled-throne, simulating the design of an Iranian fire-altar, marked with

two lions below. Buddha's right hand, is shown in a raised position in typical *Mathura* style and the left one rests on his knee. The idea to introduce a fire-altar in the context of Buddha was probably a deliberate attempt to project him as an enlightened being bright like the fire personified. In the Tuan Fang collection, a gilt bronze image of Buddha with pronounced Chinese sculptural traits illustrates him in almost the same manner as in Mathura but with greater precision. The Master in this bronze is shown seated in *dhyāna-mudrā* (meditation) on fire-altar type throne with stylized flames forming the halo. Buddha with flames around is an important theme in Buddhist art and it became much more popular in Chinese sculptures and paintings than those in India (pl. XI).

Further, in the Buddhist icons of China while the elements like the lotus throne and Buddha seated in European fashion (*pralambapāda-mudrā*) with legs extended, downwards, seem to have been borrowed from Gandhāra art tradition, the nimbus decked with lotus flower around Master's images is certainly derived from his representations in Mathura sculpture (fifth century A.D.).

It is quite likely that many of the Chinese Buddha icons were modelled after the imported models or iconic forms of Mathura and Gandhāra schools; or the other possibility could be that artists from these regions of India were invited to work in at least western China and adjoining regions in the initial stages. Scenes from the life of Buddha are also available in the Chinese art as in India but emphasis appears in the former case on specific events like his great renunciation or *Mahābhinishkramaṇa*; temptation of Buddha or *Mara Dharṣaṇa* and his passing away or *Parinirvāṇa*.

The theme of showing the *Parinirvāṇa* of Buddha, originated in Gandhāra but it reached its full development in its two Indian examples, viz., the one at Kushinagar and at Ajanta cave XXVI which also seems to have inspired the Chinese artists. The *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* especially stresses the importance of the *Parinirvāṇa* of Buddha as it indicated the continuity of Buddhahood through subsequent Buddhas to transmit the eternal message of Buddhism. The same text has also inspired the sculpting and

painting of multiple i.e. thousand figures in the Mahāyānic art in India and China because the road to Buddha-hood was open to every body. Unlike China, India has no specific representation of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna Buddha in the terms of *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*. In our view probably the only exception might be a relief showing two Buddhas flanking a tallish *stupa* in Cave XIX at Ajanta on a wall outside (pl. XII).

In this brief survey we have tried to discuss the parallels in the art of China and India in respect of Buddha figures, their source of derivation and required modification in China in the terms local aesthetic idiom. However, due to limitations of my knowledge about the great traditions of Chinese art, my inferences are to be treated as purely tentative. The issue need to be proved further critically by the experts on Central Asian and Chinese Buddhist art.

## REFERENCE

1. O. SIREN, *Chinese Sculpture*, Vol. I, II, and notes, London, 1925.
2. A.K. COOMARASWAMY, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, London, 1927.
3. NALINAKSHA DUTT, ed., *Saddhamapūṇḍarīka sūtram*, Calcutta, 1953.
4. BASIL GRAY, *Buddhist Cave Paintings at Tun-Huang*, London, 1959.
5. V.S. AGRAWALA, *Indian Art*, Varanasi, 1965.
6. J.M. ROSENFELD, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, Berkelly and Los Angeles, 1967.
7. K.G. KRISHNAN (ed.), *Uttankita Sanskrit Vidyaranya Epigraphs*, (1989).
8. L. NEHRU, *Origins of Gandharan Style*, Boirbay, Calcutta and Madras, 1989.
9. R.C. SHARMA, *Buddhist Art, Mathura School*, New Delhi, 1994.
10. TAN CHUNG, (ed.) *Dunhuang Art Through the Eyes of Duan Wen-jie*, New Delhi, 1994.

Specific references to sculptures illustrated in this article are after O. SIREN, *Chinese Sculpture*, (plates I, III, VI, and fig. 1), R.C. SHARMA, *Buddhist Art, Mathura School* (plates IV, V and X) and TAN CHUNG (ed.) *Dun huang Art Through the Eyes of Duan Wenjie* (plates VII and IX and fig. 3). I gratefully acknowledge the copyright of the authors, editors and publishers of these works.





Fig. 1 - Buddha Sculpture in Cave IV Yun kang.



Fig. 2 - Mathure, Figure of Buddha, 1st century A.D.



Fig. 3 - Buddha, Cave No. 465, Yuan Dynasty.



Pl. I: Stone column at the entrance of Hsiao Ching's tomb near Nankiang (circa 6th century A.D.).



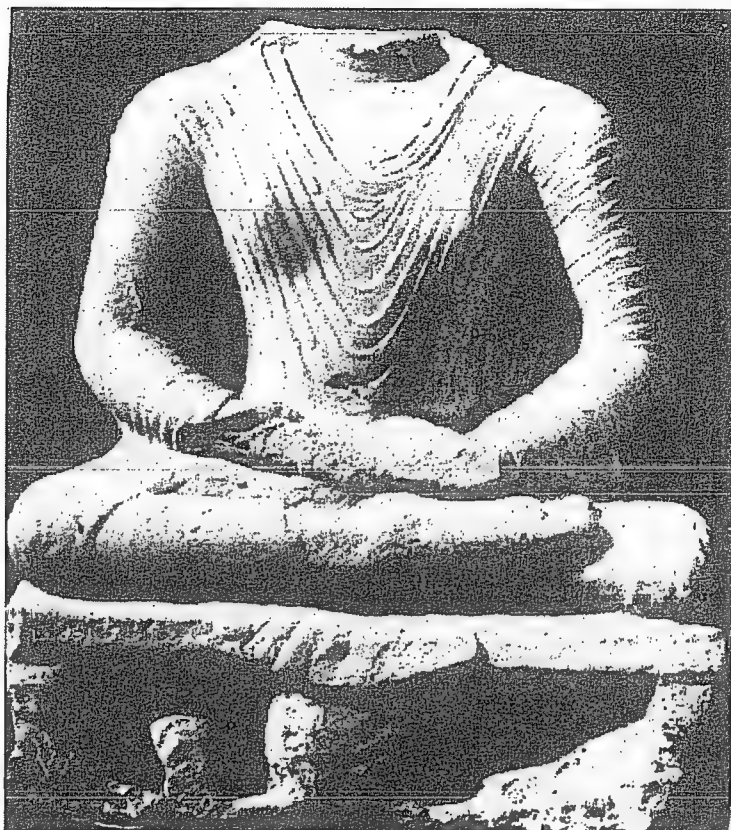
Pl. II: Memorial Posts (from Shansi area, A.D. 547) bearing Buddha and Bodhisattva figures in low reliefs including Buddha Prabhūtaratna.



Pl. III A column with multiple Buddha figures (cave 4 at Yun Kang – Shansi)



Pl. IV Early Buddha image from Mathura



Pl. V: Seated Buddha image in *dhyāna-mudrā* (Mathura, 3rd century).





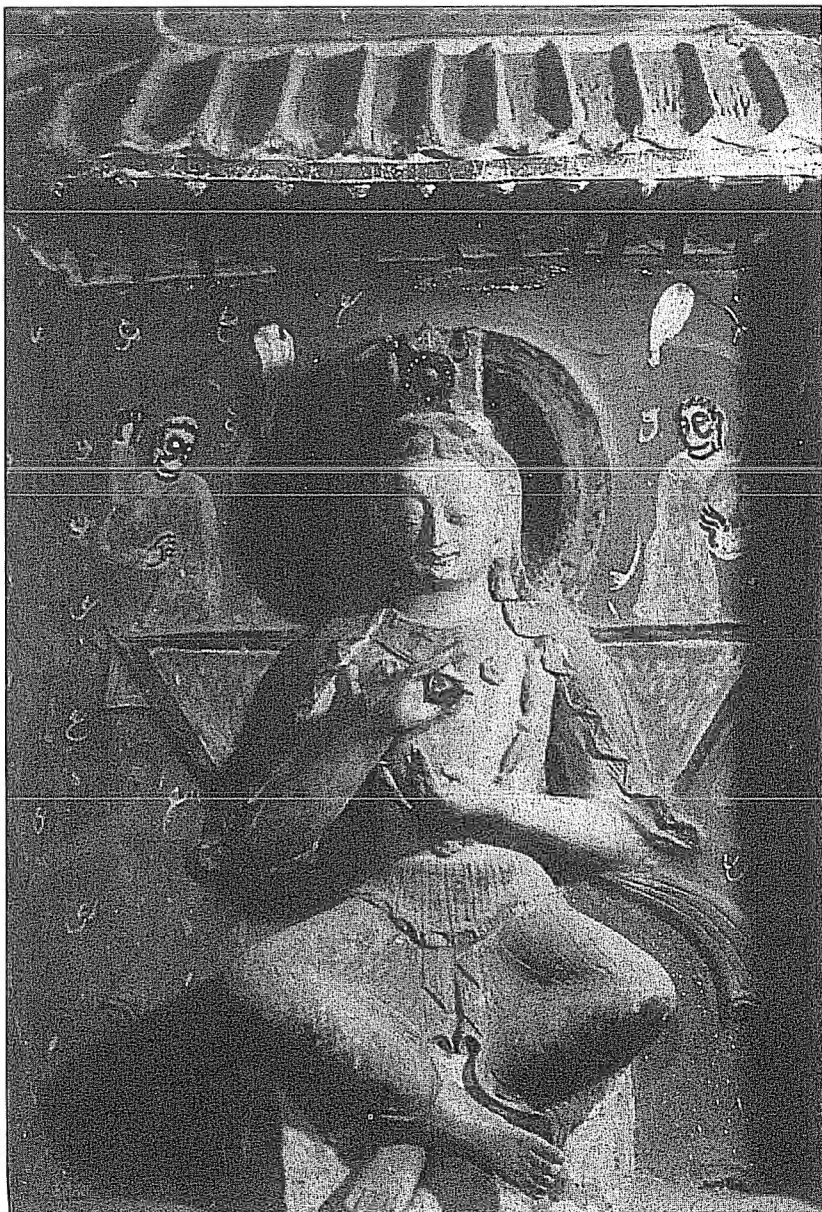
Pl. VI: Seated Bodhisattva in *dharmacakra-pravartana-mudra* within rows of thousand Buddha reliefs (Cave XVII, Yun Kang).



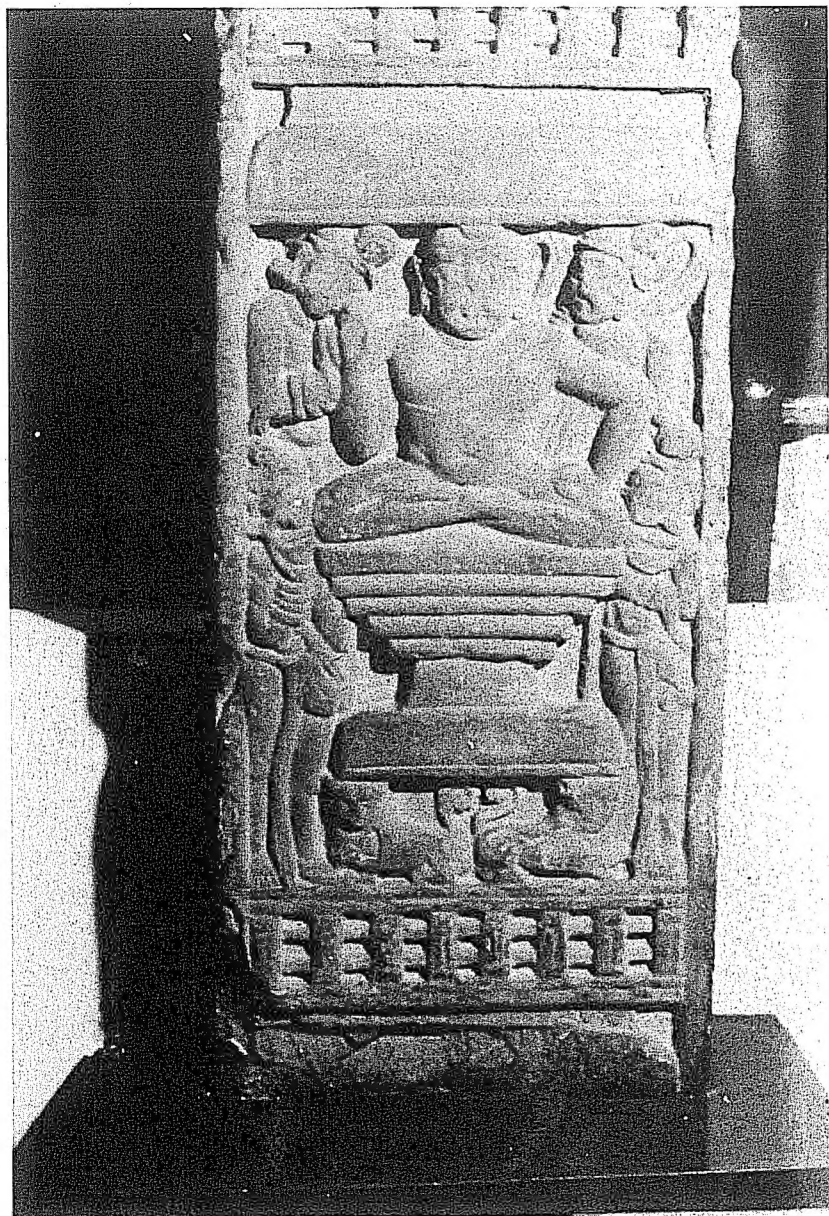
Pl. VII: Seated Buddha (Cave 248, Dunhuang).



Pl. VIII: Standing Buddha image (Cave XVIII, Yun Kang).

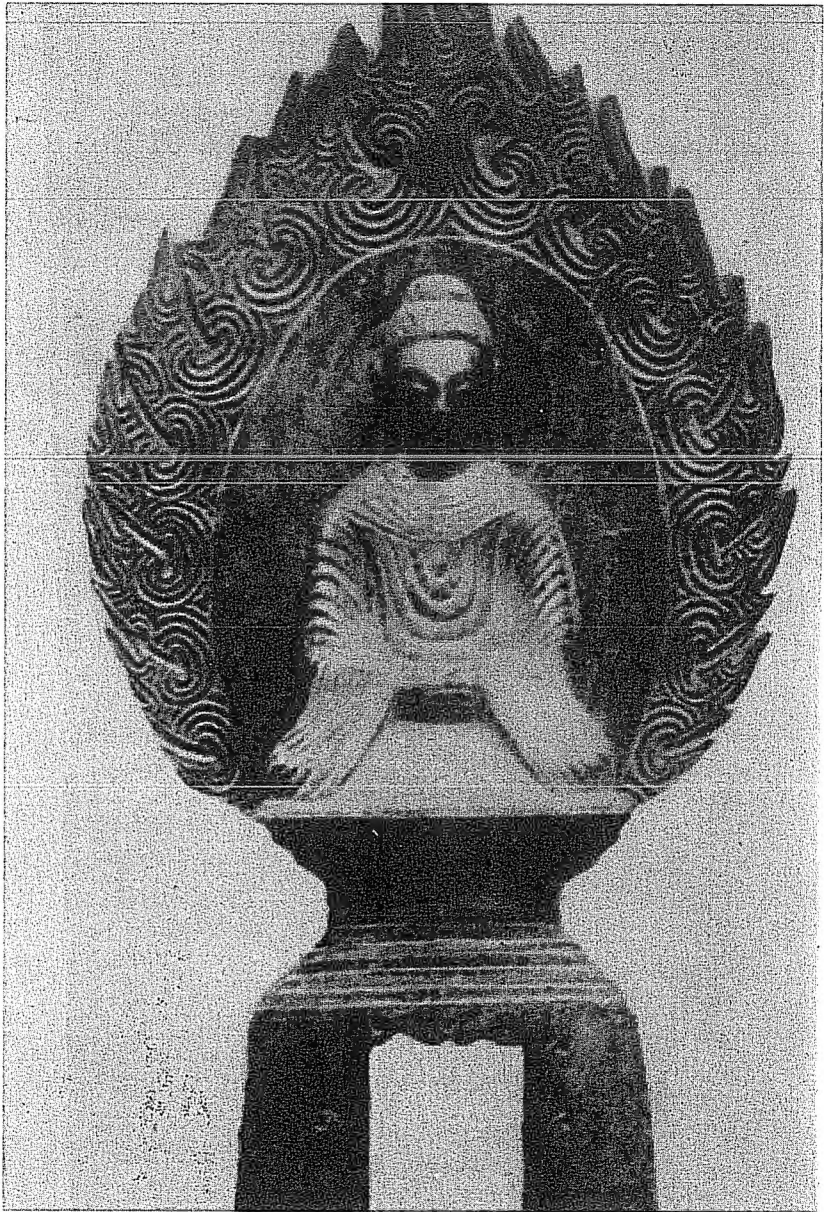


Pl. IX: Seated Bodhisattva Maitreya (Cave 275, Dunhuang).



Pl. X: Seated Buddha relief (Mathura, 1st century A.D.).





Pl. XI: Buddha image – bronze (A.D. 437).



Pl. XII: relief from Ajanta (Cave XIX, outside) identified as Buddha Śakyamuni and Prabhūtaratna (?).